"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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RELIGION AND RURAL LIFE*

By Mark A. Dawber

Once again rural life seems to be in the ascendency. The return of some 3,000,000 people to the land during the last three years, and the fact that today we have the largest population living on farms in the history of the United States, together with the fact that the immediate future will require that a goodly proportion of our people must gain their living from the soil inasmuch as the cities and urban industries offer no outlet -- all these combine to give new significance to rural life and hence to its institutions which include the country church. We are passing from agriculture as a vocation concerned chiefly with markets and making money, and once again are considering agriculture as a way of life. This is as it should be. Of course, there must be a reasonable return upon the money and labor invested, enough to keep the wolf from the door, to pay the taxes, to provide for those institutions of learning and community life that are now a necessary part of rural culture; but when these have been provided for, agriculture must be considered as a cultural vocation, and an opportunity to express life creatively. The American farm has never been a place on which to make money primarily. In comparison to the industrial vocations of the city and considered in terms of monetary income, it has never paid, but the farm and the farm home have always been the place where certain social, moral and spiritual satisfactions could be achieved.

It is toward this goal that the farmer's church must be redirected in the days that lie ahead, to call attention to the creative values of farm life and to help farm people to see the farm and the farm home as a supreme opportunity to develop those ideals and aspirations that are satisfied in the realm of spiritual achievement. Those who are living on the farms by choice, who have resisted the allurements of the city, who are content to work out life's purpose in those more natural and simpler modes of life, they can testify to a joy of life which cities cannot give.

That there are difficulties and disadvantages we are well aware; that there exists in certain sections of rural America a poverty and destitution that is indescribable, we are fully conscious, but these things do not naturally belong there, and with the intelligence and information and resources now available, given the will to face the task, these handicaps can be removed. And there is not a rural community in the land that cannot undertake the reorganization and readjustment of its life on an agricultural basis and bring forth a type of living that will be a thing of beauty and joy.

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*From an Address given on Rural Church Day, February 11, 1936, during Farm and Home Week at Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y. Dr. Dawber is a Secretary of the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Values in the Country

Isolation is no longer a necessary obstacle to social progress in the country. In saying this we are reminded, however, that the ills of isolation have been vastly overdrawn. Life today is suffering on its spiritual side, not from isolation, but because of a lack of it. Here again, there must be sufficient opportunity for social contacts, for neighborship, for those types of social organizations that are now necessary to carry forward the community life. In this regard rural life has made considerable progress. Thanks to the splendid service rendered by the agricultural colleges with their several extension agencies, the community life of rural America has been given a tremendous impetus during recent years. But these provided, the countryman and especially the farmer must come more and more to appreciate the values of a certain isolation, the spiritual renewal that is possible only in the silences, near to the soil with its renewing qualities of life, amid the beauty of the trees and the splendor of the sky, the rising and setting of the sun and a starlit night.

There is a growing desire and demand by many city people for the opportunity to steal away to the country; they long for the quiet of the farmhouse, and the tranquility of the countryside. These life-renewing values are denied to most city people. There is something in man that cannot be satisfied in the crowded streets of the city. The very nature of the country side is religious, and it, of necessity, follows that it requires people with a deep religious sense of life to appreciate and evaluate the things that constitute rural life. All of this leads to the necessity of country people getting a new perspective of the place of religious institutions and of their importance to rural life. The church and religion are a more integral part of rural life than of city life. Land and religion belong together. To sense the immediate importance of this association is an imperative that should be emphasized upon every possible occasion.

A New Sense of Community

Again a new sense of community is beginning to dawn upon the rural people. There is a more natural basis for community life with neighborship relations in the rural territory.

Organization will be necessary, and, as we have already stated, the colleges of agriculture, extension forces, farm bureaus and other agencies have been doing yeoman service along the line of community organization. But it is much more than organization; it is a spiritual thing; it is a thing of human ties and friendships, and requires the background and foundation of religion to sustain it. So again, we would plead for the recognition of the church as essential to the community life and its continuing progress. The changes that are taking place in the means of transportation, the consolidation of institutions, the re-alignment of open country people, villages and towns into larger community interests, make imperative this religious spirit and purpose to bind the people together. This community development places a particular responsibility upon the rural churches at the point of a more united approach in the religious task.

The spectacle of several competing small churches in the villages and open country communities is still a matter of shame and disappointment. It is true that much progress is being made and the several home mission boards are to be credited with the drive that is now taking place to clear rural America of competition where home mission funds are being used. State organizations and local churches must also rise to this challenge that the national boards have presented. Unless a way is found to more speedily bring the churches in line with this drive for a more complete and satisfying community life, then the community will pass the church by, and leave it standing on the sidelines to carry on its program of divisiveness. This is the most important immediate problem that confronts the farmers' church. Rural preachers should exert every effort to make possible a more unified program of religion and a cooperative approach to the development of a community consciousness, and the building of community institutions into the life of rural America.

The Cooperative Movement

There is one other important development taking place in rural America that we desire to mention as calling for service and leadership of the church. We refer to the cooperative movement. The presence just now of Doctor Kagawa of Japan is giving tremendous impetus to the cooperatives as a way out of the farmers' economic difficulty. We are convinced that it offers the only hopeful permanent policy for the farmers' economic life. Production for the market and for profit as a single aim is about over, and more and more the farmers of America must think in terms of production for use as the primary consideration. But if production for use is to succeed, it will require the driving motive of the cooperative movement. The farmer must be encouraged in a larger way to cooperate with his neighbors in the production of his crops, in the simple ways of exchanging work, tools, seeds, and the use of breeding stock; in the buying and selling of his commodities; in the meeting of his loan by a credit union.

The gist of the cooperative movement is sharing. Cooperation is essentially Christian -- cut-throat competition is anti-Christian. Doctor Kagawa calls it economic theology, and as such, the Christian people of rural America ought to be especially concerned about its introduction in the life of the rural communities.

The cooperatives will require the motive power of religion to keep them on that high plane of ethical and moral standards that are necessary for their success. The immediate interest and development of cooperatives provides a new and supreme opportunity to the farmers' church to render service. Every country preacher should acquaint himself with the movement. There is a vast literature on the subject that can be had for the asking.

Country Homes

In closing we would say a word about the rural home. The final test of the success of any community will be found in its home life. And we would add that the final test of any church will be found in its ability to develop happy and contented home-loving people. Rural life is essentially

a thing of homes, much more so than the city. The rural family is the heart of the nation. Out of its throbbings come all the currents of feeling, habits and ideals that will ultimately determine the quality of the race. Here the world began; here it continues to begin, born anew with each rural generation. The rural home needs the church to keep alive its finer ideals and to regenerate its spirit. This was never more important than at present. A thousand forces are busy breaking down the home life of the nation. The rural home is in no way immune to these devastating forces. The rural churches must band themselves together so that every possible influence for good can be exerted to conserve the home and family life of rural people. To this end we would plead with farmers and rural people in general to rise anew to reinforce the religious institutions of the countryside, and, in this way, help to conserve the moral and spiritual forces of rural life upon which the future of the nation, and civilization itself, are so dependent.